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# Strengthening Parental Involvement in Middle and High Schools: *Cultivating Communication and Connections*

*A Guide for Educators, Counselors, Administrators and Parents*

by Sue Blaney

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**Please Stop the Rollercoaster!**  
*How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride*

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**I**t's undeniable. Direct parental involvement in school decreases dramatically when a child reaches his/her teen years. Yet such involvement is essential at the middle and high school levels and can be one of the strongest predictors of a teenager's scholastic achievements.

What's to be done? What really drives this parental behavior? And how can middle and high school educators improve communication with, and involvement from, parents?

This paper explores the dynamics of the often-tentative relationship between

***"The desire to have one's child succeed in school is one of the few common threads that unites almost all parents in this country."***

Laurence Steinberg

parents of teenaged students and their child's school and offers some prescriptive advice on what educators can do to improve their connections with parents. It also provides a stage from which schools, parent-teacher organizations and parents can identify common ground and develop strategies to deepen what is universally seen to be a most worthwhile

commitment: the academic success of our teenagers.

#### **WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?**

How often have you, as an educator, seen a kid in trouble and asked yourself, "What planet do these parents live on?"

Parents of teens can be a difficult group to reach. They're often busy, seemingly out of touch and uninvolved in school. Sometimes they seem downright antagonistic. As noted in a study by Public Agenda (a nonpartisan opinion research organization) most teachers don't give parents high marks for involvement in their kids' education.

#### **Teachers say parents fail to**

- set limits,
- create enough structure
- control time with television, computers and video games
- hold their kids accountable for their behavior and academic performance.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the vast majority of parents do place a premium on their child's education, so much so that they worry about it more than they do the imminent threat of crime and drugs<sup>2</sup>. "Indeed," as Laurence Steinberg, author of *Beyond the Classroom; Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do* comments, "the desire to have one's child succeed in school is one of the few common threads that unites almost all parents in this country." And parents are aware that their efforts fall short.

#### **Parents say**

**70% of parents say they need to become more involved in their child's education<sup>3</sup>**

Teens also report that there is much room for improvement. Most note that while their family life provides love and support, their parents are not actively involved in helping them succeed in school. What's more, research shows that teens don't give

especially high grades to the schools, either.

***Teenagers say...***

- **64%** Family life provides high levels of love and support
- **26%** The teenager and his/her parents communicate positively
- **29%** Parents are active in helping the teen succeed in school
- **24%** The school provides a caring, encouraging environment

Source: Search Institute

The fact is, when it comes to communications and involvement, nobody's giving anybody else high marks.... and it's the students and their success that is ultimately impacted.

A simple step back allows us all to see that the goals that we share are the goals that matter, i.e. guiding our teenagers so that they develop abilities, confidence and responsibility in a safe, healthy and responsive environment. This discussion encourages us to refocus our attention on these goals, and to commit to improving communication and support on behalf of our teens.

**Can improved communication between schools and parents of teenagers solve all these problems on its own? Probably not, but it can go a long way.**

**PARENTAL POINT OF VIEW**

Parents often feel conflicted by contradictory forces and values, epitomized by the conflict between the perceived duty to pressure their kids for academic success and that of raising a child who is happy and secure.

Many parents feel pushed away and disempowered by their teenagers. They're confused and some may even feel like failures as they lose "control" over their children. And they don't know where to turn for help and information on how to better understand and communicate with their kids. As a result, even though they value education and have a sincere desire for their teenagers to excel in their studies, a vast majority of parents are disengaged with their teenager's school.

***Parents and teachers agree on what's most important:***

**Parents need to teach:**  
Good work habits, good values, taking responsibility

**Families shape a child's character to promote:**  
decency, civility, integrity, effort

Source: Public Agenda,  
*Playing Their Parts*

**WHY THE DECLINE?**

Parental disengagement isn't just a perception based on low attendance at school events. It's downright endemic at the secondary school level. Let's look at what's really driving this behavior:

- **Time Constraints** - The fact that most households are held together by two incomes creates a real time crunch in most families.

- **Errant Beliefs** – Parents who believe that they are fostering teen independence and responsibility may stay away from involvement in their child’s school intentionally.
- **Explicit Signals** - Parents of teens often get strong messages from their kids that their presence is not welcome, or needed, at school.
- **Just Lip Service** - Schools may “say” they welcome parents but, for many, what they say differs from what they really offer parents.
- **Lack of Knowledge** - Parents don’t know how to be involved. As their kids proceed through middle and high school, they know that their role is different than it was in the elementary grades, but they don’t know what they should be doing anymore.
- **Emotional Baggage** - Simply walking through the door of a school building has an emotional impact on many adults. What’s more, for those who don’t spend much time with teenagers, just being in their school world can be unnerving. There’s often a significant underlying intimidation factor that has a negative effect on parental involvement and participation.
- **Language and Cultural Barriers** – Parents who are not fluent in English will find any interaction with the school a major challenge, and some cultural backgrounds don’t prepare parents to believe that their role is important.

#### THE CONUNDRUM

Here is the predicament: Educators see a lack of engagement from most parents, and while most parents say they know they need to improve, they don’t know how. So teenagers languish.

Parents need information about  
**WHY**  
it’s important to be fully engaged  
in their teen’s education, and  
**HOW**  
to provide appropriate support  
for them.

Still, there’s hope. Research shows that parents of successful students are more likely to engage with the professionals at school and help them to mobilize available resources. They are not at odds with the school system, but work in partnership with it. They share a stewardship role.

Such parents are the exception, however. A major gap often exists between schools and parents of teens. You can’t “work the system” if you don’t know how to, or if you lack the requisite time and opportunity to do so. Nor can you if you’re completely disconnected with it.

Parents need a variety of ways  
in which they can  
**ENGAGE**  
and  
**CONNECT**  
with the school

#### PROVIDING INFORMATION

Schools, of course, are well situated to deliver information to parents. By their very nature, they’re at the vanguard of adolescent development and behavior. They possess a vast amount of knowledge, experience and expertise about adolescents along with an objective point of view. They’re in a position to help parents if only by allowing them to tap into this resource of information.

But educators are over-loaded with high caseloads and already have too much to fit into a day – how can they possibly take on more? **This is where simple improvement in communication can have a big impact.**

#### **BUILDING TRUST BEGINS IN INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATIONS**

A survey conducted in Hudson, Massachusetts found that effectively communicating with parents about their child's progress was associated with a more positive view of the entire community school system. In other words, the *most important* communication occurs between a specific teacher and parent

*"I haven't found the school to be a very good partner, so I'm not likely to want to get information about parenting from them.*

(Parent interview)

about a specific student's progress. Basic one - to-one communication, when done correctly, has the greatest impact on parents' connectedness with the school.

If, from the start, schools place a premium on proper and positive

communication between teachers and parents, they will foster relationships that are based on trust and will build strong connections with them.

#### **SHARING KNOWLEDGE**

As previously noted, parents often don't know how to support their teenagers. Many pull back from their child, mistakenly thinking they are helping their teen's development. Schools have vast knowledge and experience about adolescent development, norms in behavior, strategies used in improving communication with teens, and appropriate expectations for adults to have of their adolescents.

Educators must share this knowledge. By becoming a resource, they enhance parents' connectedness with the school while helping them in areas in which they need more knowledge.

We're not talking about teaching parents how to parent. That controversial area is best left to parenting educators in the private sector. We *are* talking about tapping into an educator's professional expertise, getting the educator on same side of the desk as the parents, sensitizing educators and parents to their shared goals, and repackaging information into other, more digestible, forms.

#### **TEACHERS' TAKE-AWAYS<sup>4</sup>**

In 1998, the Rhode Island Foundation began a three year program to increase parent involvement and community engagement through various projects that were initiated by teachers. Called the Sizer Fellowship Awards Program, 54 projects were funded; 21 in middle schools, and 34 in Rhode Island high schools.

Upon its completion, the project received very positive assessments. One principal noted his school had become "more user-friendly."

Several comments in the follow up report offer valuable insight which is relevant to this discussion about communication and connections. Many of the parents indicated that they "preferred participating in academic activities at the school, rather than the more traditional social events. However, several pointed out that they welcomed a variety of options for participating, choosing those that fit their own interests, concerns, and schedules."

Here are some quotes about parents from teachers upon completion of the program:

- *"I learned that parents really care about their children and about their school success."*
- *"Some parents with less education and weak English language skills are really intimidated by the school and don't know how to help with their child's school work."*

- *“Many parents seem to be thrilled by being invited to the school or the classroom.”*
- *“Some parents see schools as not very welcoming.”*
- *“Some parents say that they want to be involved in how they are to be involved – in planning for school-community-parent partnership.”*

### INCREASING CONNECTIONS

It's easy to focus on attendance at school functions as a tangible indicator of parental involvement. But this can prove to be a red herring.

Not achieving wide attendance at school functions doesn't necessarily indicate poor parental involvement – parents may be involved in other ways, they may be too busy, and the event being measured may not meet their needs. It's important to dig deeper by measuring involvement in a variety of ways, and to remember this fact: **Parents don't attend functions at schools they don't feel connected to.**

Rather than give up on school functions, educators must work on improving parents' sense of “connected-ness” (to coin a term). Each connecting point between a parent and the school provides an important opportunity to enhance these connections.

**Here are some recommendations:**

1. **Remember that ALL effective communication is personal** – Your relationship with parents is impacted by every interaction in every form. Personal interactions are always the most powerful. This can have a big effect on a parent's sense of “connected-ness” with the school.
2. **Be mindful of parent's points of view** - Parents often look at the school

system as a whole. Many disparate functions and groups get lumped together in a parent's image of “the school.” As an educator, you will benefit by thoughtfully managing and coordinating all communication with this in mind.

3. **Provide guidelines for parents** on how they can best support their middle or high school student, and why their involvement is so important. This information can be made available in hand-outs, in evening programs, and it should be downloadable from the school's web site.
4. **Be intentional about who is sending the communication** - Is the person who sends the message enhancing it or detracting from it? It can be beneficial to enhance the persona and visibility of the people that parents want to hear from, which should include the principal. This allows the development of a relationship that, for parents, can positively impact their perception of these individuals, and the parents' sense of connectedness with the school. A message coming from someone without visibility or perceived clout can detract from the credibility and importance of the message.
5. **Elevate visibility and demonstrate collaboration** - In many areas, the Parent Teacher Organization serves as the messenger for e-newsletters and other key information. At times this may be appropriate. But it should be kept in mind that messages that come from the PTO may not be read with the same urgency as those that come from a department head, principal or superintendent. Leveraging the PTO's “voice” can be accomplished, and perhaps improved, when it's demonstrated on a regular basis that they are “plugged in” and have a



strong partnership with the school's leadership.

6. **Manage the message from a departmental level** - Everyone in each department should communicate the same attitude. There are numerous connecting points between departments and parents with many opportunities to build valuable connections, or to damage them. Educators should develop a personal touch in their communications. This is how many parents will form a connection, and an educator can have a positive impact even if they never meet the parent in person.
7. **Enhance, develop and value all points of connection** – Attendance at school events shouldn't be the only measurement; all conversations and communications with parents should be viewed as an opportunity to build trust, relationships and connections.
8. **Place a personal face on each end of the communication** - In some situations communication with many parents may take place all at once - in group talks, newsletters and articles. These should be made as personal as possible. Rather than hiding behind a professional mask, encourage teachers, counselors and others to communicate in a more personal manner, as this will help relationships develop.

#### **HOMEWORK HELPERS**

Homework is an area in which parents and educators really overlap in jurisdiction, so thoughtful communication needs to take place. Although parents and teachers probably have expectations about each other in this area, to assume that they are the same is a recipe for problems. Parents of teenagers may be unaware of lack of compliance on their child's part in the area of homework completion, and

parents may be in need of assistance to know how to intervene. This is an essential area where considerate, positive communication and guidelines should be shared and discussed regularly.

#### **COMMUNICATION CHANNELS**

Here's a list of connecting points between parents and a school system, followed by some situational examples. Each represents a communication channel and as just noted, each should be personalized as much as possible.

- One-to-one meetings
- E-mail messages
- E-mail newsletter
- Printed newsletter
- Website
- Flyers
- Local newspaper
- Local cable television
- Programs/events
- Signs
- Mail
- Conferences
- Front office interactions – including attitudes, messages, parking availability and signage for visitors to the school

#### **COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING**

Developing and implementing a *Communications Plan* does not have to be a complex or time-intensive process; rather it can *save* time as it clarifies your communication objectives. Identify your intended messages, communications objectives and attitudes; apply these to the channels identified above, and you're ready to see concrete results – over time, of course. In your time constrained environment, attend to this once at the beginning of the year, have a few "check-

in” discussions during the year, and that may be all that it takes to see the fruits of this important effort.

### SUCCESS STORIES

- At one high school, callers hear the voice of the principal giving the recorded message. They know his name, they hear his voice and he is providing a “personal” connection even though it is through a recorded message.
- A newsletter from a high school guidance office includes a column that is written by a different guidance counselor each month, with a photo of the contributing counselor next to the column. This gives visibility to various counselors and gives them a personal voice.
- One middle school values the interaction between teachers and parents so highly that they provide rides for parents, if necessary, to bring them into the school to meet with the teachers. This same school requires teachers to have personal conversations with each child’s parent(s) at least once each term.
- Another middle school wanted to increase parental participation at parent-teacher conferences, so they turned the process on its head. They now have each student run his/her own conference. The teacher coaches the young teens in advance to help them to prepare their presentation. What parent could turn down attendance at such an event?!
- Yet another middle school set out to improve relations with their parent community and created a “Middle School Family Center.” Although finding adequate space was an issue, the physical space was less important than the message parents received. By providing Family Center events, they enhanced vital parent-school partnerships by answering questions, clarifying rumors, educating parents and providing networking for parents with other parents. They offered a bi-weekly coffee with the principal, hosted discussions on adolescent issues by staff and professionals in the community, provided a lending library of books about adolescence and launched a program of self-directed parenting discussion groups.
- A mother who was interviewed in the development of this report mentioned that her son’s middle school had a new principal at the beginning of the school year. This principal was new to town, and new to this rather large school system. At the beginning of the school year an article appeared in the local newspaper that profiled the principal in a personal way. It talked about his family, his home, what he is like as a person. This particular mother found that this information made her feel as though she knew him, and would feel comfortable approaching him, should the need arise. She didn’t expect that it would – but that personal information helped provide an important sense of connection to the school for her.

### SCHOOL EVENTS ARE ESSENTIAL

Lack of attendance at school events is one of the loudest complaints from school officials and PTOs alike. Yet the importance of parents crossing the school’s threshold cannot be understated. Research shows that physical attendance at school events is the single most important way that parents of successful students demonstrate support. Parents who attend school events demonstrate their commitment and involvement to the school, and to their child. Remember, however, that parents don’t come to a school to which they feel



disconnected. Enhancing connectedness is the first priority.

It should also be remembered that most parents are very, very busy. Sometimes, due to scheduling conflicts and other commitments they just can't come. This too needs to be recognized and taken into consideration, along with the fact that sometimes they don't perceive a need.

***"My attendance at school events is linked to the immediacy of my needs and weighed against my very busy life."***  
Parent interview

The best way to leverage your program and event efforts is to use the information that is shared in a variety of formats. A simple and effective way to reach people who were not able to attend an event is to create a one page write-up about the major points that were covered in the presentation, possibly adding resource material and references. The presenter should be able to provide this information, especially if a format template is provided to him or her, or it could be an assignment for a well-chosen volunteer, who, by involvement with this project becomes

more connected to the school. The materials should not only be available through the counseling center and the main office, they should be well publicized and available as downloads from the school website. This simple effort is important to do because it extends the reach and the effectiveness of that one evening event and makes the information available to parents when they need it.

***"I may not be having an issue today, but I might three months down the line. If you have the information available to me when I need it, it will be more helpful."***  
Parent interview

Now you're providing information and knowledge while building engagement and connections with the school. And

you're not re-inventing yourself, or spending much more time and effort. Simply put, you're enhancing the effectiveness of your communication.

Over time, a school should be able to compile an extensive collection of resource material, which in itself can serve as a major point of connection and service for the parent community.

### **Repackage information – and publicize its availability**

- Program transcripts can become articles in your school newspaper
- Handouts from programs can become downloadable web site content
- Newspaper articles can become handouts

### **BEWARE OF OBSTACLES**

If the goal is to form connections, it's also essential for you, as an educator, to understand some of the obstacles to communication.

**Jargon** - the language that educators use is productive with other educators but it can work against your effectiveness with parents. Evaluations and terminology that are meaningful to educators can sound like another language to parents. Most parents don't know "what kind of learner" their child is. Concepts central to educators, like the development from concrete to abstract thinking, may require an explanation for parents. If your goal is to improve communication and partnership then you must use language that is effective for everybody.

**Time Demands** – Remember to recognize and appreciate the time demands on busy parents.

**Information Overload** - Too much information has a negative impact on effective communication and will work against your objectives. Be selective and sensitive to the communication load in general if possible.

**Messages Framed in a Negative Way** - Parents don't want to be seen as having trouble with their kids. This can put them in a defensive posture and create unnecessary obstacles. While the use of inaccurate "sugar coating" is not appropriate, educators should be sensitive to the way they frame their messages. Remember, parents may not have a sense of what constitutes "normal" behavior, so providing that context for them can be the difference between a productive conversation or one that is fraught with emotional undertones.

**Measuring the "Wrong" Goals**  
- Measure your effectiveness against long-term goals, not just against your ability to fill an auditorium one night. It takes time to build connections and to build trust.

### COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Schools are central to any community. And schools can play a central role in creating connections and positive forces that have a multiple effect in a community. A connected community is a supportive community for teenagers; it is a community where safety nets are strong and in place.

Ours is a busy culture, and most families require two incomes, making it difficult for parents to have free time to get to know

one another. It's not uncommon for parents — particularly parents of teenagers — to feel disconnected from their community as a whole. While recognizing that this is not a school system's primary function, bringing parents together can enhance the effectiveness of the school system.

Here is one creative program that is provided annually at a high school – with parental attendance often exceeding 100.

### PARENT TO PARENT

Once a year, the PTO sponsors an evening of discussion, learning and collaboration. This is an opportunity for parents to meet one another, to talk about issues they face in parenting teenagers and to learn from their collective experiences.

The format is simple: parents divide into groups of eight to ten people per table, and each table has a facilitator who is a member of the school staff. Each group is

then given four or five relevant scenarios to discuss. Parents don't have to agree, or resolve to identify "correct" answers. The objective is to give them a forum in which they can discuss such issues as: "How do parents make decisions about letting kids go to parties, concerts, R-rated movies?" or other open ended issues.

Discussions like these require little effort on the

part of the school personnel and offer great opportunities to build connections between the school and parents. They also help parents by giving them a voice and a place to discuss some of the challenges they face. These introductions can lead to continuing conversations and relationships.

*"I suspect my daughter's middle school stopped having events because of low attendance. But now there are very few ways for me to meet other parents, something I value highly. The school should understand that it's important to connect parents."*

Parent interview

### **PARENT DISCUSSION GROUPS**

Parents of teenagers are hungry to connect with one another. Counselors and PTOs can be helpful in the formation of parent discussion groups that are similar to book groups. With a little coaching about the handling of sensitive topics and respect for the privacy of other families, such discussion groups have proven to be extremely effective. Not only do participating parents learn about adolescent development, share ideas and strategies and build a network of support, but their parenting style is also positively impacted, along with their children's success in school. School sponsors have found such groups very worthwhile, especially as they take minimal time from counselors and trained facilitators are not necessary.

### **"NEEDS" AND "WANTS"**

At the very start, you need a good grasp of the profile of your parent community, including typical working hours, topics of interest, languages and cultures represented, and preferred communication channels. It will enhance your effectiveness, if you are able, to gain an accurate picture of the parent community's perception of your school, especially its degree of trust and perception of openness.

You should then ascertain what specific information parents in your community want and how they want it. Don't assume, for example, that discussions about the curriculum overhaul your committee just spent nine months implementing will fill an auditorium. Parents' areas of interest for information may not be apparent unless you perform some form of needs assessment. A simple needs assessment needn't be overly extensive or expensive to help you gain this knowledge.

Here are some areas of interest expressed widely by parents of teenagers:

- Improving communication with teens
- Understanding teens' social scene
- Normal adolescent development
- How to help teens handle stress
- Alcohol and drug prevention
- How to talk about sex
- Sources of good parenting information
- Addressing low motivation in school
- Parental involvement in school
- Ways and opportunities to talk with other parents about parenting issues

### **THE POWER OF ONE**

Recognizing that most school personnel and PTO leaders are overly busy and short on time, it might feel disingenuous to expect you to welcome these suggestions to deliver more. Here is where tapping into one person's passion can be what it takes to create a new resource or event. In one junior high school, a teacher was passionately interested in providing information about adolescent depression. She had personal experience with the malady, and felt it important to share with others. She didn't have much extra time, but she was motivated to present this information in an evening program to the school/parent community. Using her connections, and getting a little organizational and promotional help from the school counselors and the PTO, she has since brought this event – which is very well attended – to the school each year for the past three years. This significant contribution has been initiated by this one individual, enriching the community.

Busy PTO chairs will sometimes reply to parents who are asking for more from them: "We'd like your help." A passion, an interest, a desire to see something happen is a powerful driver. Help these individuals gain access to enough support that new programs, new initiatives and

new resources are created each school year. Be willing to share the leadership and the spotlight, help facilitate

collaboration between departments, and you'll find creative approaches will naturally emerge.

#### WHAT ELSE DO THEY WANT?

Naturally there's even more to parental involvement. Smart and talented people often want to be actively associated with quality programs. You can get busy parents to volunteer to help if they are respected and are confident that the program's quality is sound.

Unfortunately, parent volunteers are too often underutilized by school systems and PTO's. Volunteers are too often relegated

*"There was a reason that I helped out at the school event: I was asked personally. And I was happy that I fit it into my schedule."*

Parent Interview

to mundane tasks without consideration being given to their time and professional skills. It's a squandered resource, especially tragic in these budget-constrained times. By doling out specific, relevant, parameter-contained projects for which parents can

take personal pride, volunteer armies can be created – all the while enhancing their personal connections to the school. Consider personally requesting the participation of strategically chosen individuals with talents to share. Give them as much freedom as you are able, and give them recognition.

Encouraging parental volunteering at the secondary school level should not feel threatening to educators. Public Agenda research indicates that parents are

happiest participating in chaperoning, fund-raising, and extra curricular activities. They are less interested in being involved in curriculum planning, teacher and teaching method evaluation and school expenditures. Although fund raising may not seem to be the most important way one can influence one's child's school experience, these activities help parents to form a connection to the school.

#### A FINAL WORD

Strengthening parental involvement is not an impossible task, and large increases in school budgets are not required for improvement to take place. Improvements can be made by simple adjustments: in reframing attitudes, in appreciating that each conversation with a parent is an opportunity to enhance their connections, in thoughtfully approaching all school - to - parent communication, and identifying the goals that are shared. Parents, educators and students all share the goals of academic success during the important middle and high school years. The more you are intentional and thoughtful in your communication strategy, the more you focus on enhancing positive connections between parents and the school, the more you can positively impact parental involvement, and student success.

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<sup>1</sup>Source: Public Agenda *Playing Their Parts*

<sup>2</sup>Source: Public Agenda *Playing Their Parts*

<sup>3</sup>Source: Public Agenda *Playing Their Parts*

<sup>4</sup>Davies, Don, "Middle and High School Teachers as Initiators of Parent Involvement Projects," Institute for Responsive Education.

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**Sue Blaney is the author of *Please Stop the Rollercoaster! How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride* and *Practical Tips for Parents of Young Teens; What You Can Do to Enhance Your Child's Middle School Years*. As a communications professional and the parent of two teenagers, she speaks frequently to parents, educators, and other professionals about parenting issues, improving communications, increasing parent involvement and creating parent discussion groups.**